Google considers this to be the most critical trait of successful teams

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This week, Google published a list of the five traits that its most successful teams share.

First among them was "psychological safety."

The term was coined by Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson, who gave a TEDx talk on the topic last year.

In the talk, she describes the experience that sparked her interest in psychological safety, or "a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking."

As a grad student, she was studying medical teams at hospitals in order to find out what distinguished the best performing groups. She assumed she'd find that the top teams made the fewest medication errors.

To her surprise, she found exactly the opposite: Better performing teams seemed to be making *more* errors than worse performing ones.

At some point, she realized why: It wasn't that the best teams were making the most errors, but that the best teams were *admitting* to errors and discussing them more often than other groups did. In other words, what distinguished the best performing teams was psychological safety, which facilitated a "climate of openness."

So how can leaders create psychological safety in their organizations? Edmondson outlines three paths:

1. Frame work as learning problems, as opposed to execution problems.

"Make explicit that there is enormous uncertainty ahead and enormous interdependence," Edmondson says. In other words, be clear that there are areas that still require explanation and that each team member's input matters: "We've never been here before; we can't know what will happen; we've got to have everybody's brains and voices in the game."

2. Acknowledge your own fallibility.

Make simple statements that encourage peers and subordinates to speak up, such as, "I may miss something — I need to hear from you."

3. Model curiosity by asking a lot of questions.

"That actually creates a necessity for voice," Edmondson says, because team members need to generate answers.

Leaders who create psychological safety and hold their employees accountable for excellence are the highest performing.

Edmondson gives an example of what might transpire in a psychologically unsafe workplace. A nurse might suspect that a patient is being given a dangerously high dosage of medication — but might not call the doctor to check, because the last time she spoke up, the doctor questioned her competence.

Edmondson goes on to explain how psychological safety and accountability interact to produce a high-performing team in an environment where there's uncertainty and interdependence. Leaders that allow for questions and discussions and also hold their employees accountable for excellence fall into the "learning zone," or the high-performance zone.

By contrast, leaders who *only* hold their employees accountable for excellence without creating psychological safety fall into the "anxiety zone," which Edmondson says can be dangerous.

And leaders who only create psychological safety without holding their employees accountable for excellence remain in the "comfort zone," which isn't typically the highest performing.

A combination of psychological safety and accountability is vital for teams to achieve their full potential.

"We need people to bring their absolute full selves to the challenging jobs ahead," Edmondson concludes.

Watch the TEDx Talk here: https://youtu.be/LhoLuui9gX8